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# SACRED JOURNEY



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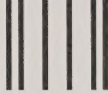
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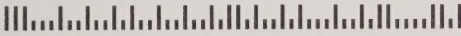
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# Community Can Heal the World

*Rebecca Laird*



I've never met Jean Vanier the founder of L'Arche, the international network that creates homes for persons with developmental disabilities, but I've seen the fruit of his life. A few years ago, I traveled to Daybreak, the L'Arche community located outside of Toronto. My purpose was to be a part of an oral history project on the life of Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and writer of more than forty books, who lived the last decade of his life at Daybreak. While there, I attended a communion service. I arrived a little early and sat midway in the light-filled chapel admiring the beauty of the architecture and the artwork, some made by community members. The space is fully accessible and as the hour for the service approached, some of those coming to worship walked in from the neighborhood while others arrived in reclining wheelchairs. The service began and those who could follow the tune joined in but so did those who could raise their voices only in groans,

*Rebecca Laird is the Director of Supervised Ministry and Pastoral Formation at Drew Theological School in Madison, NJ. She is a former editor of SACRED JOURNEY (1996-2002) and a member of the Fellowship in Prayer Board of Directors.*



sighs, and cries too deep for words. The welcome for all in the room was not contrived: it was real and visible through exchanged glances of love and gentle pats of encouragement. The obvious vulnerabilities of some made it easier for all of us, even those of us whose vulnerabilities are better hidden, to feel at home.

When it was time to partake of communion, two of the core members were asked to serve the bread and wine. One could say “bread” and said it over and over. The other didn’t speak but smiled as her assistant steadied her hands on the chalice. Never before or since was the paradoxical wholeness that comes from broken bread and poured out wine embodied in such a clear way. Joy filled that chapel.

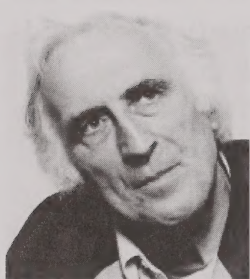
Such a moment reveals Jean Vanier’s philosophy: community can heal the world. He writes, “When we enter into communion with somebody, we become vulnerable and open ourselves to each other. There is a reciprocity, which communicates itself through the eyes and through touch. There is a sort of to-and-fro of love, a mutual understanding and respect which can lead people to share, laugh and celebrate together, or in times of sorrow, to weep together. They speak heart to heart. Communion is founded on mutual trust in which a person gives to and receives from another that which is deepest and most silent in their being.” (from *Our Journey Home* by Jean Vanier, Maryknoll: Orbis: 1997, 35)

We live in the most challenging of times. None of us is immune from the complex upheavals in the economy and our globalized world. Rather than retreating into our own private worries or ideologies behind tall walls, Jean Vanier calls us to embrace another vision: step toward each other, don’t hide your vulnerabilities, and look for God together.

# COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY



## An Interview with Jean Vanier



*Jean Vanier is a man for whom compassion is the hallmark of his life. After a brief career in the Royal Navy, Vanier went to the Institut Catholique de Paris where he studied philosophy and theology and was drawn to pray and reflect on what God might be calling him to do with his life. During the following four decades, Vanier has traveled the world creating a network of L'Arche homes where people with developmental disabilities live together in community with volunteers and a few staff. He refers to L'Arche communities as "little places where love is possible." Vanier believes, "The weak and wounded have a secret power to touch us and by opening our hearts to them, we become more human." Jean Vanier has authored many books and is the recipient of numerous humanitarian awards. He continues to make his home in the first of the L'Arche communities he founded in Trosly-Breuil, France. We hope that Vanier's commitment to a life of radical openness and compassion will inspire you as much as it does us!*

### **Fellowship in Prayer: What is the origin of the name for your communities, "L'Arche?"**

**Jean Vanier:** Its origin is in the book of Genesis—Noah's ark, a symbol of hope. L'Arche is French for ark and just as Noah invited all God's creatures into the ark, we welcome everyone at L'Arche.

**How does prayer influence you in your continuing commitment to living as a friend with people who have developmental disabilities—ministering to them and learning from them?**



Well, I think that our entire way of life at L'Arche is a prayer. We believe that for God—love of neighbor and love of God are the same. We live the gospel by always trying to create a place where God's weakest are loved and honored. We enter into communion with the poor, the weak, the fragile; we accept the different as they are. This does not mean we don't respect competence and so on, but we are about creating friendships with the least competent among us.

**So, how do prayer and other spiritual practices fit into everyday life in L'Arche communities?**

Each community is different. In my own home community every night after supper, we pray. We read a passage from the gospel, we have a moment of silence and then people pray individually and offer petitions aloud. We usually finish with the Our Father. There is Eucharist every day for anyone who wants to come. I think that every person, whether fragile or strong, in need of assistance or not, longs to be in communion with Jesus and share the incredible vision Jesus has for our world.

**Since people from diverse religious backgrounds live in L'Arche communities, how do you celebrate these differences?**

On the whole, we encourage and help Muslims to go to mosque on Fridays, Jews to attend synagogue on Saturdays, and Christians to participate in worship services at churches of their own denominations. We accept the different religious paths on which we can make our spiritual journeys. We are continually helping one

another break down fears and prejudices, the notion that I am somehow better than you and that you should be more like me. We believe the most important thing is to help every person accept who they are first, so they will then be able to grow in love and acceptance of each other, to be humble, and ready to serve so that everyone can be happier. This is not to say that we don't at times have breakages but essentially everything at L'Arche is organized toward love and prayerfulness. This is what each of us wants.

### **Describe a breakage and what you do to repair one?**

A breakage is an experience of broken communion in our relationships. It can be the result of anger—climbing the wall because some people with whom we are living make us really want to “climb a wall.” It can be caused by an imbalance in our lives. There can be difficulties in decision making. These breakages however don't affect the fundamental movement in our culture at L'Arche toward love and the acceptance of differences. To repair breakages, we ask forgiveness and work at better ways of making decisions.

### **Why do you think you have been chosen by God to work with the poor and weak in this way?**

It depends on what you mean by “chosen.” You see I believe the way God reveals choice is by giving desire. Being chosen doesn't mean you are just sitting around and you suddenly hear a voice coming to you out of the clouds. Being called begins with desire, the desire to live with God and to live with God's people who have been marginalized by society.

You know, it is not a very common thing in our world for people to want to live among those with disabilities,

to live a life governed more by love and relationship than by the need for power.

**You have this desire?**

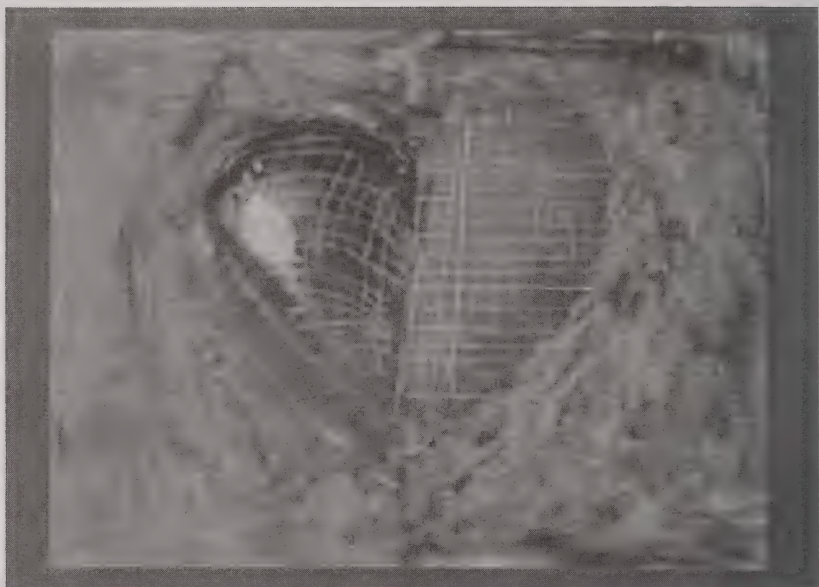
Well, I've been here for more than forty-four years. If I didn't have the desire, I would have run away screaming! Truly, we celebrate life here at L'Arche. We are not under the stress of making money because we don't need much. We're not under the stress of having to win because nobody wins anything. I find it to be a super life!

**Do people continue to come forward to lead established L'Arche communities or to create new ones?**

Never enough! People often think they will need to have a special diploma in order to work here or they see L'Arche as just another good institution for people with disabilities. Few people realize we are an ecclesiastical community trying to live the gospel message of love and acceptance every day. Some people come and discover once they get here that they don't have as much free time as they would like or they are not prepared for the interpersonal explosions that can occur or they are uncomfortable relating to severely disabled people, and they leave.

Many people today are a little frightened of commitment. There are never enough people willing to live with others who are very fragile, who have been in psychiatric hospitals and that sort of thing. Even fewer people really want to discover living with the poor and weak in community as a way to God.





*James Rhea whose artwork is featured above, copes with the challenge of autism every day. He makes the following insightful statement about his work, "Our hearts must be in balance before we can achieve peace."*

### **Is there a particular kind of training for the people who assist at the communities?**

If someone wants to come to L'Arche, they just come. We see fairly quickly if a person is at ease in relationship with people with disabilities—for us this is more important than being at ease in relationship with God.

Usually during a person's first year they make a retreat or have some other kind of special spiritual formation experience. Experiences of formation then go on continually.

### **Is it the individual's choice to live in the community?**

It could be, but sometimes it is not quite like that. Some people have come to us from situations in which their

families couldn't keep them anymore. So, they were placed here. Sometimes, they can be quite angry that they can't stay with mom and dad. There is a gradual discovery among these people with disabilities that L'Arche is a place where they can live and be happy but this discovery can take maybe five or ten years.

### **Are there children living in your communities?**

The people in our communities are all adults, except in Africa and Haiti where we also welcome children who have been abandoned in orphanages or on the streets. We encourage the members of our communities to remain in contact with important people in their lives and we try to help these other people, such as parents, recognize their adult children have lives of their own. If they come to L'Arche, we ask them to respect how their sons or daughters are living.

### **How do you support the family and friends of those with disabilities?**

We created the Faith & Light Network to bring people with developmental disabilities together with their families and friends to share their hopes and fears. Generally, this community meets once or twice a month. They read a gospel passage, spend time in prayer and then share what the gospel means in their lives. This is followed by a celebration—people singing, dancing and having fun.

**Our world today is quite broken and divided, often along religious lines, what steps do you believe we should take to begin to heal these divisions?**

Essentially, we have to learn to break through our prejudices, our feelings of superiority, our elitism. This is deeply challenging and will be accomplished by meeting the very people against whom we hold prejudice. The encounter can happen as the result of conscious desire or it can happen unexpectedly.

In the gospel, we have the story of a man who was beaten up along a road on his way to Jericho and he is helped by a Samaritan, a person from a completely different culture and religious background. This Samaritan helps the Jew and they spend the night together talking. Understanding others who are different than we are is always a matter of meeting them and talking with them in person. This recently happened to me when I was sharing with a small community of people in a village in the North of Serbia. The population is half Hungarian and half Serbian. The Hungarian Catholics there have their own churches, their own schools, their own banks, their own garages. The Orthodox Serbians likewise have their own churches, schools and so forth. So, these people never meet each other. We can think this kind of situation is peaceful but in reality, it is an uneasy peace. If we are really going to live at peace with one another, we have to break down the prejudices that divide us. We have to talk with each other through our vulnerabilities and listen to each other at the level of our common humanity, with our shared human desires, childhood happiness and pain, the fragility of everyday life, our relationships with God and many other elements.

In sharing real-life experiences, I discover you are just like me and the barriers start coming down because in point of fact we are all broken people. We are all frightened of death. We are all lacking in security and have serious



concerns. Perhaps, there's a grandma who has Alzheimer's living in the house with us and so forth and so on. When we recognize our shared difficulties, we recognize our sameness. One of the greatest of all human realities, the most beautiful, is to be at peace. To be at peace is not just the absence war, it is celebrating our togetherness, seeing all of humanity for the incredibly beautiful and diverse reality it is and recognizing our differences are not threats but gifts.

**What other advice do you have for those who are engaged in interfaith work?**

One of our assistants who is Catholic went to live for a time with a Muslim family in Morocco. She said many things changed when she was cooking alongside Muslim women, helping to clean the house with them, and taking time in the evening to pray with them. Living together is when you really get to know people. This is a basic principle at L'Arche. My advice to those engaged in interfaith work is to meet people, get to know them, accompany them, share with them and pray with them whenever you can.

**You wrote in one of your books, "Our God is a vulnerable God," can you elaborate on what this means?**

Yes, of course. This is what St. Paul says in Corinthians when he talks about the foolishness and the weakness of God. You see the incredible thing about our God is that he respects our freedom. The respect God has for each one of us is extraordinary. We can turn our backs on God and he doesn't send a thunderbolt to knock us down. God

waits. And this is the mystery. Of course, God's vulnerability is made manifest in Jesus, especially when he is pushed aside, tortured and eventually assassinated. God could have sent a legion of angels to knock everybody's heads in but instead he demonstrated respect for people—respecting them even in their aggressiveness against God. Yes, our God is a vulnerable God. There is a quote in the Book of Revelation 3:20 that reads, "I (the Lord) stand at the door knocking, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and have supper with him, and he with me." Notice that God doesn't break the door down. The mystery is that God waits for us to say, "Yes, come in."

### **God must be very patient?**

Very patient! But we are pretty impatient people. We only become patient if we receive this gift of the Spirit. We have to grow and change. We need to have our hearts of stone changed into hearts of flesh. Jesus came to transform us little by little. We need to be transformed primarily because we are frightened. If I am impatient or you are impatient, it is because one of us is afraid the other might cause hurt and so we close up. We shut the door because we don't want to be hurt waiting for the other person.

### **Can we ever fully achieve patience and no longer feel so vulnerable?**

I think we will always be vulnerable. The challenge is to carry the vulnerability. We find with every person who is dying that they are vulnerable—very vulnerable. They don't quite know what the next step is, but somehow, as

they die, they learn to accept their vulnerability. It's a pity we wait until the very last moment to accept our vulnerability. All through our lives we are given opportunities to learn to accept our vulnerability.

**Many people have said that you are a saint—"to be counted in the company of those like Mother Teresa." What is your response?**

I find this to be a very difficult thing to accept. It says somehow that people don't believe we are all called to grow in love. To say somebody is a saint can be a copout because then I can say to myself, "I don't have to do what that person is doing." The truth is that all of us, with our history, with the graces we've received and the graces we've refused, are called to grow in love. If we are Christian, we are called to become closer to Jesus, to love Jesus by being the presence of Jesus in the world today. When people told Dorothy Day she was a saint, she used to say, "That is too easy a way of getting rid of me." She is right. The reality is that we are all called to live the gospel message in some way.

**Why do you think that people like yourself, Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa—feel so strongly the desire to serve and give your lives in service to others whereas some other people feel sorrow and angst and are not prompted to serve?**

Well, I think they have to discover that service is great fun. It's really wonderful to give support to someone. It brings a sense of communion, of mutual respect and thanksgiving. You cannot imagine a better life! What is



painful is that so many people lock themselves up behind closed doors to stare at their television sets. They are lonely, lonely individuals. When we are in the world serving, helping each other to grow, we are celebrating love. This is real life and it is what makes life happy. Those who are unable to love and serve others haven't discovered the laughter, the fun, the celebration of being together with other people.

**Thank you for your time, your spirit of compassion and for the work you do. You are very admirable.**

Please don't say "admirable."

**What other word might I use?**

Say, "Wow, you are lucky!" – And come and visit!

**Well then, you are a lucky person.**

There you go. That's better. Come to L'Arche and have some fun. Peace to you.

# PRAYERS



## Prayer of L'Arche

O Father, we ask You to bless us,  
and keep us in Your love.

May L'Arche be a true home,  
where the poor in Spirit may find life;  
A place where those who are suffering,  
may find comfort and peace.

Lord, give us hearts that are open,  
hearts that are humble and gentle,  
so that we may welcome those You send,  
With tenderness and compassion.

Give us hearts full of mercy,  
that we may love and serve;  
And where discord is found,  
may we be able to heal and bring peace,  
And see in the one who is suffering,  
the living presence of Your son.

Lord, through the hands of your little ones;  
we ask you to bless us.

Through the eyes of those who are rejected,  
we ask You to smile on us.

Lord, grant freedom and friendship,  
and unity to all the world;

And on the day of Your coming,  
Welcome all people into Your Kingdom.

Amen.

## Advent

May God bless this time,  
A time of hope.  
Slow down,  
Slow down,  
Take time to pray,  
To remember,  
To anticipate.

Anticipate the celebration  
Of the returning of earth's Light.  
Anticipate the eastern star  
And its promise of a new way.  
Anticipate the birth of a child  
Divinely human held in the arms  
Of a mother, protected by a father,  
welcomed by laborers and scholars.  
Anticipate joy.

A time of hope, of slowing down  
Of prayer, remembrance and anticipation  
Advent.

~ Rachel Horsley

*Rachel Horsley lives in rural Virginia where she writes poetry. This poem was inspired while leading Advent services at her church, Cove Presbyterian.*



## O God! Refresh and Gladden my Spirit

O God! Refresh and gladden my spirit. Purify my heart. Illumine my powers. I lay all my affairs in Thy hand. Thou art my Guide and my Refuge. I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved; I will be a happy and joyful being. O God! I will no longer be full of anxiety, nor will I let trouble harass me. I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life.

O God! Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself. I dedicate myself to Thee, O Lord.

~`Abdu'l-Bahá

*Bahá'i Prayer*

## Hymn to the Creator

You came to me when I was all alone,  
Uncivilized and wild,  
Forsaking all—dominion, scepter, throne—  
To make the human race your foster child.  
To you, immortal archetype  
Of Love, I tune my rustic pipe,  
And vent my soul in magnitude,  
That you may reap the boon of human gratitude.

~ *Eric Martin*

*Eric Martin received his Masters Degree in Ancient and Medieval History from the University of Tennessee. His poetry and verse translations have appeared in over fifty worldwide print and on-line journals. He presently resides in northern Maine with his wife and family.*

# Plato's Garage

*David Anderson*



I don't know Larry that well. Our kids go to school together, and we're in a soccer car pool, which is how I ended up at his house to pick up my kids. "Come on in," he said, "the kids are upstairs—I'll tell them you're here." He was calling through the door from the garage into the house, so I walked in through the garage. I took one step in and felt as if I'd fallen into the pages of one of those do-it-yourself books about the perfect workshop. I was overcome with awe.

I saw two bikes up on perfect racks, surgically straight, and I paused. Then I saw the garden hoses rolled and stowed with the kind of precision that brings tears to the eyes of a fireman, and I stopped. As if I were in a great cathedral, I looked up and turned slowly on my heels. All the garden tools, all the lawn chairs, all the everything was right where it was supposed to be. I've seen a few neat garages in my time, but Larry's beat all. (No wonder he so blithely beckoned me through the garage door.)

*David Anderson is Rector of St. Luke's Parish in Darien, CT where he lives with his wife. Excerpted from Breakfast Ephanies, © 2002, Beacon Press, and used with permission. [www.beacon.org](http://www.beacon.org)*

Apparently I stayed too long in adoration. A moment later Larry was at the door. "Thought you'd gotten lost," he said. "No, I'm—fine," I stammered. I couldn't think quickly enough to explain why I was standing in his garage with my hands folded, so I broke down and told him the truth. "Wow," I said, gesturing widely, "your garage, Larry. It's so . . . beautiful."

If we humans could just enjoy a good garage whenever we run across one, and leave it at that, we might live in bliss. But inevitably that experience of flawless-ness—that lofty vision of Plato's "D" realm—serves only to remind us that we mortals grind out our existence in a mere shadow of the perfect archetype. In short, we can't help making the comparison. This was pretty much what I was suffering on the way home from Larry's. I kept trying to remember if Larry had ever been in my garage. At the time, of course, it wouldn't have mattered enough to remember. But that was before I'd stumbled into his Platonic garage. Now I felt inadequate.

I had a friend in college who, when uppity people outdid him, would growl in his best Southern lockjaw, "Don't make me hate you!" It was a comedy routine for my friend, but we all knew the darker reality. We were laughing at our own insecurity. Whatever we were doing could be just fine—until we met someone who did it better. I felt my jaw locking and a growl coming on.

My rationalizing skills being what they are, I quickly reasoned that Larry's doctor-wife made him scrub and organize the garage every Saturday, and that was why it reminded me of a surgical suite. After that I reasoned that he had too much time on his hands and nothing better to do. After that I stopped reasoning and faced the fact that this had nothing really to do with Larry. It's



just what happens when we try to size-up our lives against some imagined standard.

Shakespeare captured the futility of such comparisons in one of his well-known sonnets.

Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd.  
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,  
*With what I most enjoy contented least* (Sonnet 29)

I *most enjoy* my garage as is (after all, my messy car demands no better). So why is this choice *contenting me least*?

Someone writing in shirtsleeve English said it equally well: "Never compare your insides to someone else's outsides." This is just the problem. We tend to externalize the inner qualities we desire, just because we can't stack up what we can't see. *I'm good if I look good. I'm strong if I appear that way. I'm rich if you think so. I'm wise if I sound it.* No matter that goodness and strength, richness and wisdom are cultivated in secret and manifest only to those, in Jesus' terms, with "eyes to see." To our eyes, you haven't got it if the world can't see it. So our efforts are poured not into inner, hidden cultivation, but into measurable affectation. Which puts us on that killer cycle. I show what I've got out there in the great bazaar of society, but as good as it is, I'm always seeing something "better." My goods are always being discounted by comparison.

When the kingdom comes we will no longer compare. In the meantime we can hardly help it. The best we can do, it seems, is to know our vulnerability—to feel the jaw locking, the growl coming on—and to break the killer cycle. In my case, I ought to return to Larry's garage, genuflect and say, "It's perfect. It's just not me."

# SPIRITUAL PRACTICE



## Creative Intercessory Prayer

*Sybil MacBeth*

*When someone says, "Please pray for me," they are not just saying "let's have lunch sometime." They are issuing an invitation into the depths of their lives and their humanity—and often with some urgency. They are publicly exposing their vulnerability, sorrow and fear.*

~ Praying in Color

Praying for others is known as intercessory prayer. An intercessor steps before God on behalf of another person. We may ask God to help another change direction in their life or find the strength to cope with a certain outcome. We might pray for someone to experience healing and reconciliation or the strength to balance what is out of kilter. We might pray for countries, for our pets, for the earth. Whenever we pray for someone or something other than ourselves, we are engaged in a selfless act of charity and we become a part of God's compassion at work in the world.

Not all intercessory prayer has to be done with words. Sometimes we do not know what to say or we become



*Information for this article was excerpted and adapted from Praying in Color by Sybil MacBeth © 2007 Paraclete Press and used with permission. [www.paracletepress.com](http://www.paracletepress.com)*

“word-weary.” Doodling can be a form of prayer, the creation of a visual image that allows us to sit with the person for whom we are praying in a variation on stillness and then, to continue to hold them in prayer with our visual memory throughout the day. Praying in color is an active, meditative, playful prayer practice that includes coloring and improvising, tasks that could hold our attention as children for long periods of time.

To begin this creative form of prayer, center yourself by reading a passage from your sacred Scripture, singing the verse of a favorite hymn, or concentrating on your breathing, then pick up your pen or marker to pray in color.

Draw any shape on a blank sheet of paper—a triangle, a trapezoid, an imperfect circle or a squiggly line. You may write the name “God” or whatever word expresses God for you in its center—this can serve as a reminder that God is ever-present as you pray. If you prefer, you can choose to leave this first shape empty with the idea the mystery of God is at the center of your prayer.

Then, create another shape and write the name of a person for whom you want to pray in the middle of that shape or close to its edges. Add detail to your drawing, using dots, lines, circles, zigzags or whatever your hand seems to direct you to do. Your strokes may be muted or bold. There is no need to analyze them. This is not about creating a work of art; it is about creating a visual image for the mind and heart to hold in prayer. Add color to your picture, choosing ones you particularly like, or ones that remind you of the person for whom you are praying. Continue to enhance the drawing for as long as you want. The written name and emerging picture may evoke words and thoughts about the person



for whom you are praying. Writing these words can add a new layer to your prayer experience, but words are not necessary. The mere act of keeping someone as the focus of our intention can be as powerful as words.

When your drawing for one person is complete, you can move to another space on the page and start all over again with a new shape to create a design for a different name. Continue to repeat this process, adding detail and color for each person you want to hold in prayer. As you draw new shapes and names, your friends and family will form a colorful community of designs on the page. Linger with your drawing to allow the names, images and colors to imprint themselves in your mind.

As you engage in this creative prayer ritual, daydreams and distractions will probably arise, demanding center stage. Gently refocus on the persons for whom you are praying. If a thought returns more than once, write a single word on the page to remind yourself to address it later. If you encounter an obsessive thought, think of it as bathed in the colors of your prayer. Thomas Merton, the great mystic, wrote in *Seeds of Contemplation*, "If you have never had any distractions, you don't know how to pray."

Throughout the day, a flash of your prayer image may come to mind. Pause for a moment and picture the persons for whom you are interceding surrounded by the beauty of the colors you offered them in your drawing. Envision them in the presence of God. Entrust them to God's loving care.

Intercessory prayer is serious work but it can also be joyful!

# No Room at the Inn

Billy O'Callaghan



See the child, the infant boy wrapped in rags, helpless and huddled in his mother's arms, in some doorway. The baby sleeps and sometimes cries, with cold or hunger, or sorrow for the world into which he has been born, for the life that he has been cursed, not blessed, to live.

His mother is just a child herself, probably not more than seventeen or eighteen. She is pretty in simple ways, but it is a prettiness without edge, the best things about her worn down. The doorway is her home for now, their home until the moment or the hour comes when they are moved on. She watches passersby, hoping for and dreading a glimpse of a face she knows. Her heart slaps with fear as men approach, glance at her and then quickly glance away, their eyes heavy with shame and disgust.

Rain washes clean the streets but at the cost of comfort. Most people hunch their shoulders and hurry along, laden with bags of senseless impulses, their faces

*Billy O'Callaghan is a 2009 Pushcart Prize nominee and has won the George A. Birmingham Award, the Molly Keane Short Story Award and the Lunch Hour Stories Prize. His fiction appears in numerous publications. Billy resides in Cork, Ireland.*

all the same: expressions tight and stretched by imagined stress, bubbling frustration, contorting their features. Christmas is a trying time.

A rattle of coins fall into the paper cup. The young mother raises her eyes and smiles a tired, aching smile of gratitude, but the giver is already gone, just another raincoat lost in the sea of shoppers. The coins mix with the watery dregs of cold tea, small but welcome, something but never enough.

The child wakes and cradled tightly in his mother's arms, watches the ropes of Christmas lights sway gently high above the street. Reds, yellows and blues, balls of color against the drab smear of stormy sky beyond. He watches transfixed by their brightness, the seasonal colors, maybe the colors of heaven. After awhile, he starts to cry inconsolably, gasping for breath, his voice drowned out by "Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men" seeping from the warmth of a nearby shop. While the passersby hurry along, his mother whispers the nonsensical securities that gradually quell his tears.

The rain gives every breath a dampness, a down-and-out city taste. To the busy people trampling the streets, it is nothing more than the tang of inconvenience, prompting a shrug that seems to say, "Well, it wouldn't be Christmas shopping without a little discomfort." But to those already down and out, the homeless and cast aside, such discomfort is not merely a taste of inconvenience but the bane of existence.

Someone else drops a few coins, a throwaway pence. She is a middle-aged woman, her head all but hidden in a scarf. She waits to collect her thank-you smile. At least she stopped; many hurry past, and if they glance at mother and child at all it is to share a look of disgust,





their faces pinched with disapproval. It is that look that kicks and keeps on kicking and they say to anyone who will listen, "I'd give them nothing, they will only put it to drink." Maybe these people don't realize that for just a little while, drink can replace a roaring fire or chase away the fear that sits continually with our most vulnerable. Then again, maybe they just don't care.

Christmas Eve knows early darkness. When the streets quiet and a voice shouts, "All right, move it along now," mother and child are disturbed into motion. They seek shelter, although the shelters are usually full during the winter time; so they must walk away the hours of Eve to Day, stealing minutes of sleep in some vacant doorway or another. Maybe they will be all right, mother and child. Maybe there is still a way up from here, or a way out. Maybe the infant boy will grow up to be a man, a somebody, a king. Maybe he will change the world; it happened once before, so why not again?

# ILLUMINATIONS



We find rest in those we love, and we provide a resting place in ourselves for those who love us.

*~ St. Bernard of Clairvaux*

It is positive to want to go first, provided the intention is to pave the way for others, make their path easier . . . help them or . . . show them the way.

*~ His Holiness the Dalai Lama*

Praying for others is an act of hospitality. It involves opening the door of our hearts and minds and admitting people into our consciousness. Praying for others requires time and energy. It is saying, "Yes, ...I will support you in your challenges and your suffering."

*~ Sybil MacBeth*

Life is not meaningful to us unless serving an end beyond itself, unless it is of value to someone else.

*~ Abraham J. Herschel*

You are the servant of the poor. They are your masters, and the more difficult they will be, the more love you must give them. It is for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give to them.

*~ St. Vincent de Paul*

We are servants truly, and it is God whom we adore.

*~ Ibn 'Arabi*

Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, and the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, anytime.

~ *Thich Nhat Hanh*

None of us knows what is ahead. The important thing is to use today wisely and well, and face tomorrow eagerly and cheerfully with the certainty that we shall be equal to what it brings.

~ *Channing Pollock*

Charity is never as lovely as when one has lost consciousness that one is practicing charity. You mean I helped you? I was so enjoying myself. I was just doing my dance. It helped you, that is wonderful. Congratulations to you. No credit to me.

~ *Anthony de Mello*

The word of God calls his people to work for justice, for only thus can there be peace.

~ *Bishop Desmond Tutu*

In your heart must well that sympathy which soothes away all pain from the hearts of others.

~ *Paramahansa Yogananda*

At the Home for the Dying in Kalighat, a visitor wondered at the peace that pervaded everywhere. I told him: God is here. Castes and creeds mean nothing. It does not matter that they are not of my faith.

~ *Mother Teresa*

# Compassion

Jan Davis



We walked along the tropical Mexican beach that night. I remember Ruth saying, "I did not get the gift of compassion." Earlier that day she had been rude to the hotel staff, demeaned the restaurant server, and verbally kicked aside the old woman who got in her way. It was so obvious too, as we walked that she simply could not sense the natural beauty around her—the moist sand between her toes, the fog-edged glow of the moon, the soft lambent breezes, the repeating resounding surge of the frothy waves, the scent of salt in the air. I wondered, had she ever listened to the words of *Annie's Song* by John Denver? "You fill up my senses like a night in the forest, like the mountains in springtime, like a walk in the rain, like a storm in the desert, like a sleepy blue ocean. . ." In the years since that walk on the beach I've never known Ruth to be able to "feel with"—whether it be her husband, nature, or her own soul.

Perhaps that is where compassion is born, in the tears of one's own soul where the senses have been ripped open

*Jan Davis is a Spiritual Director who has been referred to as a Soul Tender. She leads retreats and parish missions, is a Catholic lay minister and Benedictine Oblate. Her Doctor of Ministries degree is in Proclamation and Worship. Visit her website at [www.unfoldingfullpotential.com](http://www.unfoldingfullpotential.com)*



so as to feel with the rumble of the storms and the placidity of the sleepy blue ocean. Compassion is the quality of feeling with—the kind of feeling that invites one to journey with another down the unmarked paths of life.

Compassion is a virtue common to all major religious traditions: in Buddhism it is that which makes the heart of the good move at the pain of others. It is said that the two hearts quiver together. Jains, in their compassion, will harm no living being. A holy Hindu man will pray to his Lord (Krishna) to deliver suffering souls from their pain. In the Islamic tradition, a praying Muslim will begin each day and each act by invoking God the Merciful and Compassionate. According to Jewish understanding, God is the Compassionate One, embodying the Thirteen Attributes of Compassion (Ex 34:6-7). In Biblical Hebrew, compassion is like that of a mother for her child. The same is true in Christianity: God is addressed as the Father of compassion (2 Cor 1:3) which flows through Christ. Feeling deeply the sorrow of Martha and Mary at the death of their brother Lazarus, Jesus wept, before calling Lazarus out of his death sleep to renewed life. Jesus Christ in his ministry, especially the healing of the senses, is the icon of compassion. How can one look at the crucified body of Jesus without a swelling of compassion within! Standing in the presence of the magnificent *Pieta* by Michelangelo Buonarroti, and gazing upon a mother's feeling toward her son, I certainly quivered with compassion. As one ponders the beauty of that sculpture, what becomes so poignantly noticeable is the tender care Mary has for her son Jesus. Perhaps the sculpture was misnamed. It should have been *Compassione*.

Holding the body of her dead son was something Mary never should have had to do. No parent should. After my

son, Wade, died I often went back in my memory to the times when I held him across my lap. At those times my emotions were so strong but at the same time my senses were numbed. The pain was too much to bear alone and I soon found a support group for bereaved parents, The Compassionate Friends. There, at our monthly gatherings, we can talk about our children and know that others listen with the ear of their hearts and understand in the well of their own experience. Or we can sit in silence while our souls quiver together. Through the process of journeying together through grief, we learn, in time, to live and to love again. As is so often heard at The Compassionate Friends, "We need not walk alone."

Sometimes compassion draws us to journey with one another down an unmarked road. I remember the story of the little boy who was so excited about going to Grandma's house. I asked him, "Where is Grandma's house?" He told me how to get there: first you go down a long straight road, then down a bumpy road, and then down a *really* curvy road, and then you're there. While the seed of compassion is "feeling with" the other, compassion often bears fruit in walking with the other along life's crooked and bumpy roads.

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# A REFLECTION



## On the Journey Toward Radical Hospitality

*Victoria S. Schmidt*

My friend Isaiah is a missionary who works in Medellin, Columbia with homeless youth. Many are addicted to glue which slowly causes irreversible brain damage. Their addiction to glue allows them to cope with their emotional pain and the violence of living on the streets of Medellin. The children survive by eating scraps from the garbage. Often Isaiah would visit with a young man named Louis who lived on the streets in a makeshift shelter of boxes and rusted scraps of corrugated metal. When Isaiah visited, Louis always took off his tattered shirt to spread on the ground so Isaiah would not have to sit in the dirt. Sadly, Louis was killed on the same street where he had shown love and hospitality to his friend.

I recall that story as an example of radical hospitality. How often I have missed an opportunity to welcome someone into my home or to offer them a seat, or even a warm smile. It would not be a sacrifice for me like it was for Louis and yet I still protect my personal space. Fr. Richard Rohr once told a story

*Victoria S. Schmidt lives in Springfield, IL. She has a missionary heart that has been formed by thirty years of missionary work around the world. She currently serves as Director of Theresian World Ministry, an International Catholic women's organization.*





about seeing a message written on a sidewalk by a homeless person that read, "See how they protect their nothing." And it challenges me to reflect on what God-given gifts I am afraid to share with my brothers and sisters.

On my journey toward radical hospitality, I want to be like Louis who had nothing but the shirt on his back and a small homemade shelter to share with his friend Isaiah. Louis had nothing but gave everything.

# One Button at a Time

Darlene Cohen



When I became crippled by rheumatoid arthritis, I was completely overcome by unremitting pain, terror, and despair. Unable to walk, too weak to lift a phone, I thought bitterly of how much time I had wasted pursuing everlasting peace of mind. For seven years, over thousand of hours of zazen and maybe thirty sesshins, I had sat on a black cushion pursuing enlightenment in order to cope with just such an occasion—all to no avail. But I was wrong about the failure of practice, and within months of being struck by the condition, I knew it.

First of all, though ravaged by pain and disease, my body was deeply settled. While my mind had been plotting my rise to power at the San Francisco Zen Center, my body had been developing the tremendous stability associated with regular sitting practice. So even though I was overwhelmed and consumed by the pain, I was able to surrender completely to the physicality of my existence, moment after moment. Left alone to explore my consciousness without distraction, I discovered that wherever I looked, there were experiences other than pain

*Darlene Cohen is a longtime member of the San Francisco Zen Center and an ordained Zen priest. While living at Green Gulch Farm, Zen Center's temple in Marin County, she developed rheumatoid arthritis which led her to explore meditation practice as a way to address chronic pain. Excerpted from The Best Buddhist Writing 2008, edited by Melvin McLeod © 2008 Shambhala Publications and used with permission. [www.shambhala.com](http://www.shambhala.com)*

waiting to be noticed: here is bending, here is breath, here is sun warming, here is unbearable fire, here is tightness. All these perceptions were fresh and fascinating.

The consciousness that sitting practice cultivates is open to many kinds of experience, not all of them necessarily pleasant. If at any given moment I am aware of ten different elements—my bottom on the chair, the sound of cars passing outside, the thought of the laundry I have to do, the hum of the air conditioner, an unpleasant stab of sharp knee pain, cool air entering my nostrils, warm air going out—and one of them is pain, that pain will dominate my life. But if I am aware of a hundred elements, those ten plus more subtle sensations—the animal presence of other people sitting quietly in the room, the shadow of the lamp against the wall, the brush of my hair against my ear, the pressure of my clothes against my skin—then pain is merely one of many elements of my consciousness and that is pain I can live with.

With such a mind, life becomes richly textured. Consciously putting a cup on a table and feeling the flat surfaces meet becomes a rare, satisfying, “just-right” kind of experience. Washing dishes is not just about getting the dishes clean; it’s also about feeling the warm, soapy water soothing my arthritic fingers. Doing laundry, I can smell its cleanness and luxuriate in the simple movements of folding, a counterpoint to my complex life.

For people in pain, tapping into this wisdom beyond wisdom is simply how to survive. When we have nothing left to hold on to, we must find comfort and support in the mundane details of our everyday lives, which are less than mundane when they’re the reason we’re willing to stay alive. This is the upside of impermanence: the shining uniqueness of beings and objects when we begin to notice

their comforting presence. When preferences for a particular experience fade, the myriad things come forward to play, shimmering with suchness. Obviously, flowers and trees do this, but so do beer cans and microwaves. They're all waiting for our embrace. It is enormously empowering to inhabit a world so vibrant with singularity.

Thirty years after first being devastated by pain, I never enter a room without noticing what sources of comfort and ease will sustain me: not only the recliner and the pillow, but also the light streaming in from the window, the handmade vase on the table, even

Live in the  
vibrancy of  
the sensual  
present.

the muffled drone of the air conditioner—all of it created for the pleasure of human beings. By bringing into my conscious life objects that offer their kind companionship—my toothbrush and my dishes, my spoon and my car—I feel their tangible support as well as their sometimes charming

idiosyncrasies. Awareness of this support can be simultaneous with resistance to my pain and the search for ways to stop it. These tracks don't hinder each other; they are both active, engaged encounters.

For instance, I have difficulty dressing. My arthritic shoulders, elbows, and fingers flinch from the stretching, tugging, and tying required to dress myself. Velcro might solve my problem, but it's out of the question; I'm not and never have been a utilitarian dresser. Rather, I'm the sort who is thrilled by the fine art of asymmetrical hems, darts, double-stitched denim seams, linings in jackets, and bias-cut skirts. My throat catches at a flutter of silk in the



breeze. My underwear is adorned with lace and embroidered flowers. Instead of hurrying to dress and becoming frustrated by how difficult it is to pull up socks, put on shoes, and button blouses, I make it a well-loved morning ritual: I lay out all the clothes on the couch and sit in the warmth of the morning sun as I put on each lovely article one at a time, noting the temperature change associated with covering my body, admiring the darts and seams and insets that search out its topography.

Most of my physical tasks have taken on this ceremonial quality. If we can't be speedy and productive, if something as simple as putting on clothes takes all of our attention and focus, we must find our home in the activity itself as its goal recedes into the future. The practice of doing each thing for its own sake, the staple of Zen training, had mostly eluded me as a Zen student striving for enlightenment and better housing at Green Gulch Farm. But now, as I live in the vibrancy of the sensual present, clearly seeing each moment as my most viable source of solace and delight, I prefer to stay right here. I have lost any sense that there is something special or tragic about my circumstances. Day in and day out, they are just my life.

# P O E T R Y



## Carol Service (A Memory)

One by one, the nave lights darken  
As the crowded Chapel settles into silence;  
And a last gust of cold air blows across shoulders,  
And the doors are shut.

Down the small passage-way, the Choir sways,  
Robes floating lightly, hand-held candles aglow.  
A sense of occasion trembles in the air:  
The stillness is complete.

Blue lights on green trees beside the Altar  
Glow in the contrasting darkness. The organist  
Watches intently for the carefully given signal:  
The single treble voice begins.

And as the choir processes and the light strengthens,  
And the sound grown from choir to congregation,  
All are awaiting the fine, strong, soaring statement:  
“Not in that poor lowly stable . . . ”

*Richard Bradley was born and educated in England. After serving in the Royal Marines, he spent the next forty-two years in education. His distinguished career culminated as Head of the Rivers School, Weston, MA. He is now retired and lives with his wife in South Natick, MA.*

Through the bidding, the act of dedication,  
The flow of hymns and readings and carols,  
The hearts ease as the question is answered:  
It is all as we had recalled.

The triumphant statement, after prophecy,  
Revelation and the simple scenes of the Nativity,  
Comes in the words of the Christmas gospel:  
“In the beginning . . .”, and we all stand.

It is done. The gradual celebration is complete.  
Sound swells into the deafening confidence  
Of the greatest of Christmas hymns,  
Sung from the hearts of all.

*~ Richard Bradley*



## On the Ark

Floating in a basket  
On the upper edge of forever  
The thousand lapping tongues of the river  
Rock me to an early sleep.  
I dream of Noah and the fish of the sea.

I patched my box of a ship with bitumen  
But the world came with me, wherever  
It carried me,  
And I had to take care of it.

Deliver me from prison, Noah prayed,  
My soul is tired of the smell  
Of lions, of panthers, of bears.

When the time came,  
The dove followed the raven  
The raven chased dragonflies all over the surface.  
After a week passed, the dove returned faithfully.  
The dragonflies were satisfied  
Wandering over the water.  
The raven became lost in its liberty.

Sometimes all faith means  
Is remembering kindness,  
Sometimes we realize our faith  
By making its open heart real.

~ Steven Weiner

*Steven Weiner is a nurse practitioner, a hospital administrator, a poet, a father, and is an active member in his synagogue. His poetry has been published in the Journal of the Central Commission of American Rabbis.*



## Surrender

Leaves tumble recklessly  
adrift on the whim of the wind.  
Effortlessly . . . Freely . . . .  
Content not to chart their own course.  
~ Connie Williams

## Kindness

Walk kindly among your brothers,  
flesh and blood of the Father,  
Living beings of His Spirit,  
on Earth to fulfill His Word,  
Companions of your body and soul,  
born to live in happiness,  
Friends of your broken heart,  
yearning for perfection in a lesser world.  
~ Catherine Ross

*Connie Williams is a full-time mom and part-time freelancer. She holds a Bachelor's Degree from Fairmont State College and resides with her husband and three daughters in rural WV. Her quest is to "fill the paper with the breathings of your heart," as Wordsworth once said.*

*Catherine Ross earned her Masters Degree in Spanish Literature from New York University. Catherine and her husband travel extensively in Europe and Latin America for the purpose of understanding diverse cultures. They make their home in Riverside, CA.*

# Praying with Lior

## Lior Liebling



*Lior Liebling was diagnosed with Down syndrome as an infant but he never let his disability stand in the way of talking to God. In fact, Lior's dedication to prayer is an inspiration to his whole family, as well as to the members of the synagogue where he worships and is known as "Little Rebbe." Lior is featured in a documentary film, produced by Ilana Trachtman, highlighting his preparation for and celebration of his Bar Mitzvah, an occasion made more poignant by memories of his mother who died while he was still very young. Lior means "light"—and as his father, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling notes, "Lior ignites something . . . he can change the energy in a room." Following, in his own words, are some of Lior's thoughts on prayer. He reminds all of us that people with intellectual disabilities have profound spiritual gifts to share. For more information, visit [www.prayingwithlior.com](http://www.prayingwithlior.com).*

I started praying when I was between two and three years old. My family went to synagogue every Saturday and for holidays. On Friday nights we would have *shabbos* dinner and I would say the blessings with my family over the wine, the *challah*, when we washed our hands, and when we lit the candles. We always sang *Shalom Alechein* and other songs.

Praying makes me happy and is something that I enjoy. When I pray I think about good things, like being loveable; having great parents; and being with my community. I also think about not arguing or getting into fights. When I pray I think about people, too. I like to be with others while praying, although it is not about being with people but sharing the prayer space.

I think prayer is a way of getting connected with others. To be in a *davenning* (prayer) space means to be open, to be

aware, to be connected with others. I feel a lot of energy when I sing and pray with others. I feel a part of my Jewish community which is important because it is important to be with people, talk with people—then my spirit is definitely happy. When we do the Torah service I can be a part of the *aliyah* (coming up to the torah). I do the blessing and hear the reading. We do the conclusion, and hear the *mesheberach* (the blessing for those who have come up to the Torah).

Sometimes I pray alone—like in my house or outside. I love to meditate and just sit. When I go to the synagogue, my Rabbi Yael leads the meditation services, which I really like. I like the quiet. When I pray by myself I *daven* from my heart. I go to the deep side. It feels like coming into the power. I feel the power and can be in the spot—my space. And when I am in that space it is an awesome thing. I like to give *kavvanot* (intentions for my prayer). It is about using my mind to create a space that I want to be in. Sometimes it is easy and sometimes it is hard to get to that space. When I get interrupted I lose that space and do what I need to do to get back there.

I really like *Pesukey de Zimrah* (Verses of Praise) the beginning prayers of the Shabbat service, and the concluding prayers because I like singing. Singing helps me to feel good. My favorite is *Halleluyah*. I love being in the *Halleluyah* moment. I sometimes sing *Halleluyah* when I am doing something new. Other favorites are *Eleh Hamedah Libi* (Only This Does My Heart Desire). The words of that prayer and the song are very powerful.

Prayer is important in my life because there is no prayer without life—since I have a life, I have to pray. When I sing *Halleluyah*, or *Elohai Neshamah* (O' God the Soul You Have Given Me is Pure) the praying is coming out loud.

# Free to Fly

Elaine P. Morgan



Recently during the change of season, winter to spring, I witnessed flocks of chattering birds return to the nearby area for mating and nesting. They were singing. Their spirits appeared to soar as they made their arrival from some distant place. They didn't appear to be concerned about the continuous cycle of change or all the traveling they had to do during the course of one year. They simply followed the North Star back and forth, surrendering to the magnetic pull of this celestial navigational guide.

As a mobility challenged person who has struggled for years with physical limitations and restrictions, I have realized at times that my mind and emotions are equally powerful and oppressive. I have wondered how I might feel free as a bird. I know birds can fly wherever they want. At the same time, they attend to the guidance of the North Star to carry them by use of their own wings from one migratory location to another, enabling them to thrive during seasonal changes.

*Elaine P. Morgan is a poet and freelance writer who has spent the last thirty years in contemplative living in historic Warrenton, VA. She is currently Senior Poet Laureate for the State of Virginia. She is an active member of The Merton Institute's "Bridges to Contemplative Living" study group.*



What do these feathered messengers of nature and me have in common? I certainly don't have wings, or legs that can carry me very far. I realize what I do have is Spirit. I have my own personal lodestar to take me where I can thrive during all seasons of life. By surrendering to my inner navigational guide, my mind and heart are lifted to great heights, transcending physical limitations and supplying me with the grace of feeling so alive and so very free. So why should I worry? I choose to be free as a bird.



## ENDPIECE



### Who Are Those People Over There?

*Jane Higgins*

I could see their open faces, childlike, offering the utter gift of themselves in each “hello,” so intense and full of hope. They know, as do I, how fleeting is the time they can come into the circle of anyone’s warmth. They look as if to say, “Don’t hate me. But if you do, it’s okay,” and they drift away out of the crowd, alone. It’s like an old refrain, over and over again for these thin-skinned and transparent, who seem so skinny and naked. They remind me of a peculiar kind of flower—maybe a nasturtium—low to the ground, velvet to the touch, veins all thin and green and vulnerable—as if they could be snapped by any offhand gesture—could bleed to death by the mere pressure of someone’s fingernail on their main stem. They walk in poignancy, and they are like thin reeds. The wind never lets them alone for very long. They bend and bend; they bow their heads before the wind—and sometimes they break.

Had a little weep tonight for all the sophisticated behavior we put on, those of us who sit within our inner and outer walls, planting our feet on the concrete slabs of our lives, seeing how many bricks we can make in a day to build a superwall so that we won’t see those people over there. The wind never gets in—we never get out, hooray for us—we are—secure?

*Sr. Jane Higgins, RSM has served as an English teacher, high school principal, hospital chaplain, speaker and retreat director. She resides in Rhode Island.*

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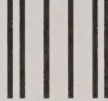
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